



Subject:	Christmas Programme 2021
Date:	12 January 2022
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide Members with a summary of activity delivered as part of a Christmas programme in November-December 2021.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Note the contents of this report and that further information on the socio-economic impact of activity will be presented in due course.
3.0	Main report

3.1	Members will be aware that in January 2021, SP&R Committee agreed the recommendation that events delivered directly by Council would be suspended until September 2021 due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3.2	On an annual basis, the Council's City Events Unit delivers a series of large-scale public events, which are free to access by both citizens and visitors to the city, on behalf of Belfast City Council. This is further supported by the activity of other teams included the Tourism, Culture, Heritage and Arts Unit who support a number of annual programmes and activities and the Markets Unit who manage the delivery of the Christmas Market at City Hall in addition to year round activity at St George's and Smithfield markets.
3.3	In June Committee agreed to adapt the standard approach to delivering events and to focus Council activity on two key programmes whilst maintaining financial support for ongoing activity delivered by the cultural sector across the year including events and festivals. The first of these Council led events was the Maritime Weekender in September 2021 in partnership with the Maritime Belfast Trust. Over 40,000 people attended across the 2 days with a diverse and innovative programme that ensured optimum consideration for public safety. The second programme was to focus on Christmas 2021. The challenge for officers was to design a programme that continued to be cognisant of safety considerations and have the ability to respond to a changing environment whilst meeting the needs of city stakeholders including those businesses impacted by the pandemic.
3.4	As well as responding to the pandemic the programme also aimed to meet the development objectives set out in the ten-year Cultural Strategy including long-term recommendations for events in the city including better strategic alignment across the Council in the design and, delivery of these event based programmes.
3.5	<p>These factors combined in such a way that the re-opening of the city, the easing of restrictions and the ongoing impact of Covid-19 accelerated the need to consider the role of events in a wider programme of seasonal animation and recovery that would:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve the cultural vibrancy of the city - Foster civic pride - Position the Belfast brand - Support the local culture, arts and events sectors - Deliver direct economic benefits - Support businesses
3.6	Cultural animation and creative interventions were identified as fundamental in welcoming people back into the city and played a significant role in creating an authentic and open environment at Christmas. This year's programme involved a combination of creative initiatives such as street performance, projections, music, window dressing and lighting

	installations all inspired by the theme 'Once Upon a Time in Belfast'; utilising local artists, creatives and designers to create an authentic and engaging experience for all throughout the festive season. However, the concept was designed against the backdrop of the on-going pandemic.
3.7	<p>The main components of the Christmas programme were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Christmas lighting scheme - City dressing and additional lighting - Enchanted evenings as part of the opening weekend - Weekend animation - 2 Royal Avenue - Christmas Market - Marketing and Communications
3.8	Belfast's Christmas celebrations officially began on Saturday 20 and Sunday 21 November with the <i>Once Upon a Time in Belfast</i> opening weekend event, which took place both evenings from 6.30pm-9pm. This replaced the 'traditional' Christmas Lights Switch On.
3.9	Operationally, the format of the new 'Opening Weekend' event presented challenges, particularly around permissions for use of buildings, windows, and city centre spaces. However, the weekend event proved to be successful. Despite concerns over moving away from the traditional switch on format, the new approach offered increased value for money and audience satisfaction in an environment that was designed to prioritise public safety.
3.10	Estimated audiences over the 2 evenings (20 & 21 November) was 15,000, with the event primarily taking place in the City Centre across key zones which included Donegall Place, Cornmarket, Royal Avenue, Fountain Street, Fountain Lane, Queen Street, Castle Street, Castle Lane, Berry Street, Rosemary Street and Lower Garfield Street. The audience profile was similar to the previous format with a strong focus on families.
3.11	<p>Belfast City Council commissioned an independent socio-economic survey for the <i>Once Upon a time in Belfast</i> event. Results included the following feedback:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 65% of visitors were from the Belfast City Council area, and a further 35% from elsewhere with a small percentage of visitors from Republic of Ireland (3%). - 54% attended the event with children. - 84% gave the event a rating of 8 out of 10 or above, including 27% who rated it as 'Extremely good'. - 92% of visitors agreed that the event improves the city's reputation as a host for events like these and as a place to visit.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 69% of visitors said they would 'definitely' revisit the <i>Once Upon a Time in Belfast</i> event in future years, while 99% agree there should be more events like this in Belfast. - 98% believe that events like this encourage people to come to Belfast, and 93% said that such events improve their sense of well-being and community.
3.12	33 Belfast based organisations from the cultural, arts and theatre/performance sectors were engaged to take part in this event and provide the animation over the 2 nights, with an additional 2 companies coming in from GB and 1 from Ireland. The entertainment onsite was a mix of music, dance, street performance, comedy and theatrical performance under the overall creative banner of <i>Once Upon a Time</i> .
3.13	In addition, a music programme was curated across the Autumn/Winter period including several music elements for the opening weekend including performances at Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church and music on Berry Street and Lower Garfield Street.
	Window Animation
3.14	A festive window display was commissioned for a large vacant unit on Royal Avenue via local cultural organisation ArtsEkta who have been working with local youth groups to develop large scale illuminated lantern sculptures of the city's landmarks as part of their Luminate project. This ran from 20 November – 4 January. A second festive window display was also commissioned on Royal Avenue working with Big Telly Theatre Company as part of their Elf Factory production. These displays along with window vinyls with <i>Once Upon a Time</i> themed artwork transformed this area of Royal Avenue for the festive period.
3.15	New to the programme this year was live window animation on the opening weekend (20 & 21 November) in two of the main retail stores on Donegall Place. This included dance, music and comedy theatre sketches running throughout the event aligned to the fairytale Christmas theme. This proved to be extremely popular with audiences and something to be built upon for future years. The Visit Belfast window was also dressed during this period.
3.16	Belfast City Centre Management's annual Festive window competition returned in November and December aimed to encourage retailers to dress their windows for Christmas. This year's winners spanned four categories: Retail (Independent), Retail (Multiple), Hospitality and a Wild Card. The Wild Card category was based on the theme, <i>Once Upon a Time</i> , adding to the schedule of events that Belfast City Council was already hosting this festive season aimed at attracting footfall and improving vibrancy.
	Lighting and illumination
3.17	Members will be aware of the consistently positive public response to the lighting of City Hall. Therefore, a temporary scheme was devised for Council's recently acquired heritage assets

	on Royal Avenue at the former Tesco site and the Bank of Ireland building. A key highlight of the weekend event was the 3D Mapped projection on 2 Royal Avenue which then continued with a 7-week window projection. The show both evenings ran every 10 minutes from 6.30pm-9pm and was a bespoke design aligned to the event theme.
3.18	Another highlight for the Christmas period was the illuminations of the old Bank of Ireland Building at the bottom of Royal Avenue which ran from 20 November until 4 January 2022. The lighting up of the Bank of Ireland building from the inside out received significant coverage on social media and acted as an effective lead in raising awareness in advance of the December announcement on Belfast Stories. This is a temporary intervention however consideration is being given to longer-term initiatives.
3.19	Additional illuminations across the 2 nights included Fountain House above Primark on Donegall Place, the Mayfair building in Cornmarket and on Queen Street above the former Craftworld store.
	Christmas Lighting Scheme
3.20	2021 was the second year of a three-year lighting scheme that focuses on main city centre areas. Following feedback from the retail and hospitality sectors improvements were able to be made to the scheme within the agreed scope of works. This included re-instating lighting along Ann Street. Feedback on the scheme was positive however there continues to be requests for an extension of the scheme including arterial routes. This currently cannot be facilitated within existing contracts or budgets however consideration should be given as part of a review exercise in advance of any new scheme from 2023 onwards. This should also consider the strategic context and recommendations of the lighting strategy as well as trends from elsewhere that increasingly targets investment at schemes that can provide year-round animation and lighting.
	2 Royal Avenue
3.21	Having secured funding from Tourism NI, a cross-Council team worked together to transform the former Tesco building at 2 Royal Avenue into a meanwhile venue. Throughout December programming focussed on music in recognition of Belfast's designation as a UNESCO City of Music. The opening of the building received extensive positive media coverage including broadcast and digital as well as positive public feedback across social media platforms.
3.22	The music programme celebrated the diversity of the city's cultural and music offer presenting opportunities to showcase a range of artists. These free to access events were complemented by a wider programme that included children's workshops and artisan markets. Audience profile and feedback is currently being collated as part of the monitoring requirements attached to the funding. These will be reported back to Committee in due course. A new programme is in development to run from January to March including the

	<p>setting up of a booking system to ensure access to the space for as many local cultural and community organisations as possible.</p>
3.23	<p>Christmas Market</p> <p>The Christmas Market ran from Saturday 20 November to Thursday 23 December 2021 with extended hours Thursdays to Saturdays. This was the 16th year of the Belfast Christmas Market in the grounds of Belfast City Hall with no market taking place in 2020. As a continental Christmas Market, traders came from over 22 different countries selling a diverse range of authentic continental products. This was alongside a good representation of local traders that increased from 30% to around 50% in 2021.</p>
3.24	<p>Prior to the opening of the market the NI Executive introduced new Covid restrictions applicable to the Christmas Market to be implemented from the 29th November 2021 and were fully mandatory from the 13th December 2021.</p>
3.25	<p>While the market finished its run just before Christmas and full data has not been collected, it is estimated that footfall for 2021 is in the region of 700,000 compared to 1.26m in 2019. However, it should be noted that all information gathered is preliminary, especially footfall figures, as none of the economic algorithms and equations have been applied. Event organisers felt that a reduced number of office workers in the city centre impacted overall footfall figures and the specific nature of sales with a reduction in food and beverage sales compared to an increase in gift and craft sales. Footfall further reduced in the immediate run into Christmas and it is thought that this was due to public concerns over the Omicron variant of the virus. Despite these challenges the market made an important contribution to the overall Christmas experience in the city.</p>
3.26	<p>The support for the local economy through the delivery of the market included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Just less than 50% of traders now come from within NI. - Those traders from outside NI support the local economy by employing additional local staff and using local accommodation providers and services. - The construction and facilities management associated with the market was delivered by local companies.
3.27	<p>Marketing and Communications Activity</p> <p>In addition to the campaign delivered by Visit Belfast, Council's marketing and communications team delivered extensive activity commencing in early November. <i>Once upon a Time in Belfast</i> event was one segment of a wider <i>Come On In</i> campaign which had outdoor, radio and digital presence further supplemented by print and online media coverage. Council provided a strong social media presence in the run up to the event from early November, with daily messaging right through the Christmas period. In 2021 a special</p>

	<p>edition 20-page A5 booklet was produced for the first time and circulated to 158,000 homes week beginning 15 November.</p> <p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>3.28 There are no financial implications to this report.</p> <p><u>Equality & Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>3.29 None.</p>
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None.